Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice

Volume 2 | Issue 4 Article 5

6-1-1999

The Experience and Meaning of a Marianist Education Today: A National High School Study of Mission and School Culture

Carolyn S. Ridenour

Alan Demmitt

Jill L. Lindsey-North

Recommended Citation

Ridenour, C. S., Demmitt, A., & Lindsey-North, J. L. (1999). The Experience and Meaning of a Marianist Education Today: A National High School Study of Mission and School Culture. *Journal of Catholic Education, 2* (4). http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0204052013

THE EXPERIENCE AND MEANING OF A MARIANIST EDUCATION TODAY: A NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDY OF MISSION AND SCHOOL CULTURE

CAROLYN S. RIDENOUR
ALAN DEMMITT
JILL L. LINDSEY-NORTH
University of Dayton

Focus groups conducted with students, parents, teachers, and alumni (N=540) at 13 Catholic Marianist high schools provided rich insights into the experience and meaning of the education provided at these institutions. While academic excellence was a common thread woven across meaning given by both parents and teachers, students and alumni articulated a meaning replete with images of belonging. That these schools valued persons holistically (rather than solely academically) permeated most groups. Using theories of organizational culture as the foundation, the relationship between the mission and the meaning of life in these schools is discussed.

Very few large studies of Catholic high schools have been conducted. In 1993 Bryk, Lee, and Holland published their well-recognized study of seven Catholic high schools, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good.* Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982) and Greeley (1982) also published national studies of Catholic high schools. Less well-known quantitative studies, such as Gamoran's 1988 comparative study of achievement among public magnet schools, Catholic schools, and private schools, also exist. For the most part these studies were attempts to examine learning outcomes among Catholic school students in comparison to students in public schools.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The research reported here was undertaken in order to understand the culture of the schools sponsored by one Catholic community, the Society of Mary,

Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice, Vol. 2, No. 4, June 1999, 410-428

founded by Fr. William Joseph Chaminade, and to speculate about the future of Catholic Marianist education. This study, then, differs from prior studies in at least two ways. The national sample of schools studied consists of those that are affiliated with the Society of Mary, the Marianists. Second, the study attempted to look at school culture rather than learning outcomes. The researchers were affiliated with a university sponsored by the Marianists; therefore, studying the ways in which the charism was lived out was of local interest.

While we approached this qualitative study inductively, we were aware of and interested in the five characteristics of a Marianist education that were integral to the conversation that generated the research:

Educate for formation in faith
Provide an integral quality education
Educate in family spirit
Educate for service, justice, and peace
Educate for adaptation and change

We were interested in whether or not these characteristics are manifest in the lives of these schools.

The research project was labeled EMMET (the Experience and Meaning of a Marianist Education Today) to capture both dynamics: the experience and the meaning of that experience.

The authors acknowledge the participation of these researchers in the EMMET Project: Stella Barber, James Biddle, Patricia First, Donald Frericks, Gordon Fuchs, Scott Hall, William Losito, Thomas Hunt, Joseph Kamis, S.M., Lloyd Laubach, Thomas Oldenski, S.M., and T. J. Wallace.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

That a school's culture is a description of "the way things are" was how Rossman, Corbett, and Firestone (1988) characterized their study on changing school cultures. Culture "becomes defined, then, as members react to, interpret, shape, and reinterpret the organization and its structure, processes, and events. This interplay of individual idiosyncrasy and collective meaning expresses itself in patterns of norms, beliefs, and values called 'culture'" (Rossman, Corbett, & Firestone, 1988, p. 5). Wilson defines culture as "socially shared and transmitted knowledge of what is, and what ought to be, symbolized in act and artifact" (1971, p. 90). This study, too, is a study of school culture and the mission that may drive it.

The structure of culture stabilizes a school. Individuals who are members of a particular culture internalize its norms, beliefs, and values and act in concert with them (Wilson, 1971). Furthermore, cultural components of a school

seem almost to obligate those affiliated with the school to assimilate certain meanings about life in that culture. The order of things, the meanings attached to school life, are unquestionably accepted. Critical reflection, on the other hand, requires that the culture of a school from time to time be questioned.

In this study, culture, as personally constructed and shared knowledge, begs two questions: What makes up the knowledge as constructed by the constituencies of the Marianist schools? And do these constituencies (i.e., students, teachers, parents, and alumni) have shared knowledge? To follow both lines of inquiry is to reveal the Marianist school culture.

The Marianist-affiliated schools we studied are ostensibly driven by a set of beliefs from the Marianist tradition which characterize Marianist education and make up the mission of these schools. This mission is what connects them, what establishes the interrelatedness of the 13 schools. This mission should, we assumed, create an identifiable culture. While the schools vary in their locations and the demographic profiles of their constituencies, what unites these schools is the commonality of the Marianist tradition. As in Groome's (1996) national study of Catholic schools, the Marianist mission is a common thread we assumed would be revealed in a distinctiveness that could be observed and described.

Our study of schools in one Catholic tradition takes place in the wider context of Catholic education. Catholic schools face a paradox in the late 1990s. On one hand, they are growing in popularity as an alternative to the public schools after a 30-year decline in enrollment. The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) reports that since 1992 there has been a strong increase in Catholic school enrollment. More than 79,000 new students and over 150 new schools have been added since that year (NCEA, 1996).

On the other hand, fewer priests, brothers, and sisters walk the halls and guide the learning of students. The decreasing visibility and influence of vowed religious have created what some refer to as an identity crisis. The NCEA (1996), in its most recent statistical profile of Catholic schools, reported that the laity in elementary and secondary schools make up 89.9% of the teaching and administrative staffs. Religious women comprise 7.8% of the staffs, while priests and brothers make up 2.4%. A fundamental question becomes: Do lay educators perpetuate the mission?

In 1994, O'Brien cited Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, former president of the University of Notre Dame, as the primary spokesperson for Catholic higher education. Hesburgh (1986) warned parents to guard the Catholic character of their schools and families as they would their lives. This admonition might be based on the decreasing presence of vowed religious and on the fact that the Catholic character of a school may be vulnerable to dilution from contemporary culture outside the school. This study aimed to describe the culture and character of Catholic Marianist schools.

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research has the advantage of objectively measuring common constructs across all schools and all individuals who respond, providing one kind of knowledge about the life in Marianist schools (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Qualitative research, on the other hand, allows the more natural, unanticipated, real language of the people engaged in Marianist schools to come from them on their own terms—a knowledge that is grounded in revealed authentic life experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lancy, 1993; Newman & Benz, 1998).

A team of 12 researchers, all of whom were either faculty members or doctoral students at the University of Dayton, carried out our data gathering. At least two members of the research team conducted focus groups at each school with the four constituencies: students, teachers, alumni, and parents. Our focus group methods were based primarily on the work of Brotherson (1994). Three schools were visited during the spring of 1996. The other 10 schools were visited between January and May of 1997. Administrators within each school selected the participants in focus group conversations. They were requested to assemble a representative group of approximately 12 volunteers from each constituency. Of the resulting 540 individuals who participated, nearly 26% were teachers, about 27% were students, 28% were parents, and over 18% were alumni. All schools were well represented, and participation at individual schools ranged from 26 to 67 people.

All participants agreed in writing to participate. They were assured that in our reporting of results they would remain anonymous. They were also informed in writing that, during the focus group process, they were free to leave at any time. Most focus groups were audiotaped, and a secretary who did not know the identity of the focus group participants typed transcriptions. Some focus groups (fewer than 10%) were not recorded but a researcher kept written notes.

A researcher led off with an initial inquiry (Spradley's [1979] "grand tour" question) about life in the school; and, for the most part, the participants carried it from there. When dialogue did not flow naturally from the group, the researcher directed the conversation with a set of prescribed questions. Because this process is a naturally occurring one and the purpose is to allow free flow of ideas, optimal results are usually attained with little control by the researcher (Brotherson, 1994; Morgan, 1988). These conversations at the schools offered us a chance to hear the underlying reasons people feel the way they do about their experiences in these schools (Moustakas, 1990; Van Manen, 1990).

After the focus groups in all 13 schools were completed, the audiotapes were transcribed. The three authors met and designed a strategy for analysis. Initially, each researcher took a copy of the transcript of one focus group

from the same school. The initial attempt was to read through the transcript, particularly attending to each "unit of meaning," a phrase or the smallest group of words that has identifiable meaning (Spradley, 1979). Each unit of meaning was, on second reading, codified with a label that maintained the language of the respondent as closely as possible. These units of meaning were then copied on 3" x 5" index cards. In the corner of the card was noted the constituency (students, teachers, parents, or alumni) and school (coded 1-13). The resultant collection of cards for each constituency was then sorted into categories determined by common identifiable meaning.

For example, in one school three phrases that were identified and copied onto cards were "prayer important to this school," "discussing God encouraged," and "Mass rarely held." These and others were ultimately grouped together and categorized with the label "religious life." These three phrases have a religious theme in common, even though one speaks to a negative quality and the other two are positive.

Following this sorting, we compared our results in order to determine whether or not we were using similar standards in sorting and categorizing the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The intent at this stage of analysis was not interpretation but merely categorizing the data (Spradley, 1979; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We determined that few discrepancies existed among our categories and that we could proceed to divide the transcripts among us for coding.

To this end, each of us took the transcripts from three or four schools. The coding process was used and specific codes developed for each school, resulting in 13 collections of cards. At the conclusion of this phase of the analysis, we met and discussed our experiences with this process. We then proceeded to phase three.

Phase three consisted of sorting the 3" x 5" cards according to the four groups of respondents. In other words, rather than 13 sets of cards resulting from the 13 schools, we grouped the cards in relation to the four constituencies (students, teachers, parents, and alumni). This step was taken to move the analysis from the school level to the group level.

In the fourth phase of analysis, each of us studied the codes written on the cards and sorted them into categories. Each group (students, teachers, parents, and alumni) was analyzed separately, the goal being to raise the analysis to the next level: creating categories made up of a combined set of constituent cards with similar meaning (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Spradley, 1979).

Now that categories of meaning had been derived from each group of respondents, the analysis moved to the level of interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From our particular points of view, and having read, re-read, and discussed the massive amount of text derived from these groups, we attempted to make sense of it. In so doing, we reduced it to thematic strands or "domains of meaning."

In the discussion of the results of the focus groups, the reader will

encounter language mostly about "meaning." The choice of this term is made deliberately. When groups of constituents in these schools (students, teachers, parents, and alumni) converse about their experiences in these schools, they are revealing much about what the school "means" to them. Our goal as qualitative researchers is to uncover that meaning.

RESULTS

Only meaning that crosses the conversations we had within the four groups (students, teachers, parents, and alumni) was included. Students may have, for example, discussed a particular class, teacher, or athletic event. Those particulars themselves do not directly contribute to what we know about Marianist schools. The context in which the students discuss the specifics, however, and the attitudes that the students have about those specific experiences can be aggregated across the attitudes of students in other schools, thus informing us of the organization's culture.

We describe the dimensions of meaning of life in and around these schools by reporting on each of the four groups separately. First, the meaning of school life for students is presented; then, our interpretation of what teachers revealed. Third, we report on the meaning from parents, and, finally, the alumni conclusions are described. We conclude with a summary of meaning of life in Marianist schools in which we report common and connected meaning across the four groups of informants.

STUDENTS

Our conversations with students resulted in five general dimensions of meaning that we have reduced to (1) their search for relevance, (2) the ethos of school as both caring and challenging, (3) their sense of belonging, (4) their formal (rather than personal) faith life, and (5) their experience of service as tasks. Each of these is reviewed in depth in the next five sections.

Domain 1: Students are searching for relevance.

The common strand through all subsequent dimensions of our findings from students was a tenacious and deep search for relevance. This meaning permeated through the other four dimensions: belonging, faith life, the ethos of the school, and service tasks.

Students' experiences, in some sense, have resulted in a moralistic tone: a developmental stage among these adolescents, perhaps, on the way to stable moral values. The meaning of their school lives comes through in judgments about how they relate to society. Issues of class, race, and gender surface in personal ways, but there were almost no references to the social injustices suffered by others.

Students discussed how school relates to their future lives beyond the school, how school prepares them to face a "real" world. Within this domain of meaning, students recognize the importance that is placed on college preparation. They definitely see school as a pathway to college. Teachers in the classrooms seem to be connecting subject matter to life outside the school through real-world applications. Where ethnic diversity exists, students value learning to respect differences, learning to get along with others unlike oneself, and learning confidence. The other side of this diversity coin, however, is evidence of a different meaning of these links to the world outside. That there is "excessive discipline," that the teachers themselves are not an ethnically diverse group, and that "cheating is not always addressed" show the limits of tolerance in a different way. Language about the school sheltering them—a quality that students embrace as desirable—was countered by the notion that this same shelter disconnected them from the real world.

Students believed they were valued holistically, and this helped satisfy their longing for relevance. We speculate that these students in Marianist schools, more so than those in public schools, may have a more centered, cohesive sense of self because of the value placed on the "whole person." They seem to behave on this premise in natural ways, assuming it at a deep level that, to them, is unremarkable.

Domain 2: The ethos of school life for students is related to being cared for and being challenged in a structured environment.

The schools' ethos was best captured by the constructs of care, challenge, and structure. Students displayed a strong affect about their school life, an emotional strand similar to the depth of feeling that characterizes most adolescents about almost all aspects of their lives. These adolescents probably do not reveal this affect any differently than adolescents in most schools.

Students described a "challenging" environment, a "demanding" academic life, and a feeling that their personal lives (as opposed to only the academic or athletic) were important. Supporting the feeling that the personal truly matters, students characterized the schools as "like a good family," "warm," and "caring." Students seemed to sense the notion of family and community, a Marianist cultural component. Students recognize that their schools "are not like public schools"; the reasons for this conclusion were not always clear. More discipline and higher academic expectations are what this seems to mean to students, rather than a focus on the religious or spiritual. Teachers whom students saw as "outdated" or not sufficiently demanding were seen as "bringing down" the school.

Discipline and its accompanying structure are both accepted and resisted, in large part because the path to success in the school is to "learn the ropes early." The highly structured school climate is connected to a sense that administrators are image conscious; attempts are made to hide any negative charac-

teristics of the schools, leading to more control. Such structure is important to students, however, as revealed by their discomfort with instability: changes in program and schedules and transient teachers. This paradoxical (love-hate) relationship with structure is common among adolescents. Developmentally, they are at a stage in which resolving such conflicts is expected.

Teachers in these schools are "more than teachers," a hybrid of instructor-cum-counselor-cum-advocate-cum-confidant. Students construct a meaning of school life that is based in large part on an assumption that teachers' time is theirs. That teachers attend events (sports and otherwise), for example, and generally engage in students' lives outside the classroom, being available for their attention, friendship, and advocacy, is crucial. We interpreted the students' view of teachers as personally caring while making rigorous coursework demands.

Spirituality and religion seemed of minor importance. Students who had contact with Marianist brothers and priests (as well as sisters and priests from other orders and the dioceses) valued them as general role models; as people "who were there for them" or as leaders who motivate and challenge, rather than as designated spiritual advisors. The religious values and the centrality of Catholic beliefs were much more evident in parents' responses than they were in those from students. The organizational culture across all the schools reflected Fr. Chaminade's statement that students should be treated better than they deserve (Tedesco, 1977).

Domain 3: Students feel a satisfied sense of belonging.

The meaning of school life for these students comes through as a sense of belonging that is manifest in the dynamics of school life. Belonging was frequently related to sports as activities that build school spirit.

Students are fans before they get to the high school themselves and then return to athletic events after they graduate. The rituals of marching band and pep rallies are ways that school spirit is acted out—spirit that is either high or low. Losing athletic contests hurts spirit; lack of fans reflects a low spirit; and low attendance reduces loyalty to the school. Students sense that the more involved you are in sports, the more loyal you are perceived to be by others. (Of course, this is not totally good news.) Students also referred to involvement in clubs as important. In all-male schools, the lack of females builds camaraderie and spirit as well.

A sense of belonging also came through in discussions of school size and relationships. Students are of two minds about school size. A small school allows everyone to know everyone; however, if the enrollment is too small, outsiders may view the school as having low prestige that affects students' desires to belong. Satisfaction with belonging was based on the interpersonal dynamics at play in students' lives. Students' conversations were full of references to "close friends" and "lasting relationships."

Finally, students revealed some awareness of the power of organizational issues. Mergers of two schools, for example, can diminish a sense of belonging. The existence of harsh rules that create conflicts among administrators and teachers, teachers and parents, or teachers and students was posed as a cause-and-effect relationship that "takes away from (a feeling of) belonging." Although the schools attempt to create a culture where everyone is valued and accepted, of course they're not always totally successful. Belonging is sometimes predicated, unfortunately, on an us-versus-them approach.

Domain 4: Students' faith life is more a public and academic experience and less a personal and spiritual experience.

The faith life of the students in the school was directly linked to three dynamics: religion class (most frequently and strongly), people, and programs. That the religion classes were the subject matter that emerged in discussions of faith revealed the power of the academic structure. The language used to discuss this domain was largely academic and curricular rather than personal and spiritual. Relevance of this class to the real world is important. That religion class "should connect to real life" was expressed by the students in compelling language. For them religion class is clearly linked, albeit in a narrow academic way, to securing a certain identity that transcends college or occupation. Religion classes that are more open to discussion or debate and less concerned with rules, facts, and Church history appeal to students. Once again, the "real-life application" is sought. This quality was an important dimension of the programs that students connected to their faith life in schools.

Students pointed to times when faith life can be connected to activities outside the school and merge the school to the real world. Retreats generated a sense of relevance that school-based activities did not. Three qualities enhance the meaningfulness of retreats: They are less structured than classrooms, they are not bound by rules, and they are voluntary. Stronger than these three, however, is the positive feeling students reported about "being involved in the planning" of such events. A bonding together, an emotional connection, is derived from these experiences, as are opportunities to demonstrate prayerfulness and leadership.

Contact with Marianist priests and brothers (and also sisters and priests from other orders) solidifies the faith experience. Students experience the Marianist spirit in human form and understand rules that are linked to people. The role of non-Catholics in the school is a front-burner issue. A true understanding of the role they play is paradoxical, like many understandings that come from students. Students see non-Catholic peers as problematic and as valuable sources of diverse viewpoints. Some Catholics and non-Catholics grow in their faith lives during high school. Students told stories of conver-

sions of non-Catholics that resulted from the school culture experience. At the same time, some professed Catholics and professed non-Catholics display little interest in or understanding of God. As expected, the organizational culture of the schools was grounded in the Roman Catholic religion. Students view religion as both overtly stressed and an unspoken issue in decisions by administration, in forms of discipline, and in curriculum.

Domain 5: Service consists largely of tasks to perform.
The meaning of service to students is "tasks"—tasks that situate them in settings where they can perform good. In most cases, these are tasks that are required for a course; they are separate from the rest of student life and are disparaged if reduced to writing a report or a journal. When service was connected to a religion course (as it most frequently was) the identity of the teacher of that course was important. Students often connected the meaning of service to the interaction with that particular faculty member. Students explain that frequently service is resisted or entered into reluctantly, yet over time it becomes valued and meaningful. One student, for example, spoke eloquently of resisting service in a nursing home only to be deeply drawn into the lives of the patients in ways that changed his life for the better. The concept of service as a way to live as Jesus did and an opportunity to be Christian, while definitely evident, was much less a part of the conversations than were the formats in which service was required, documented, and counted.

TEACHERS

Teachers see the schools in transition, struggling to define and stabilize an identity. Changing a historical tradition is not easy. The changing landscape of the schools (declining number of Marianists, mergers between schools, financial challenges, high rates of staff turnover) is insufficient to weaken the loyalty that comes from teachers. (Loyalty as a part of the meaning of school life for teachers is discussed here and in the section on family spirit as well. As a dimension, it fits in both discussions.) Loyalty seems an important part of the meaning of school life for teachers, a quality that may generate in teachers' lives the time that students seem to require that extends beyond the normal classroom schedule. Without such loyalty, that time commitment may not occur.

Teachers choose to teach in these schools partly because they are Catholic schools, but also perhaps because problems they perceive as more typical of the public schools are not distractions from their time for teaching. The opportunity for integrating the whole person, rather than solely focusing on the cognitive, appeals to these teachers. The unrepresentativeness of their students, who tend to be from the higher ends of the academic talent pool, also works to keep these teachers in these schools.

Domain 1: Teachers' lives at school are affected by a formal structure they sometimes opt out of.

The structural dimension of school life that was so much a part of the meaning of school life for students has a different meaning among teachers. Teachers desire "minimal structure and maximal freedom." In this desire, at least, teachers are much like students. Unlike students, however, they often opt to operate in a structurelessness that students are not allowed. Because they value structure less as a force for unity, teachers seem to be drawn into community. Ironically, therefore, what might seem at first glance as a worry for administration actually enhances the Marianist spirit.

The "camaraderie among teachers" is strong and central to school climate. Less strong is the link to formal structures of leadership. The push-pull feelings of teachers toward structure ("we need more"/"we need less") must be admitted. For instance, teachers suggested that problems in schools might be better confronted by a stronger administration. The "hard-line decisions," "difficult decisions," are those that administrators are charged with, according to teachers. Camaraderie is manifest in attending Mass together and in a sense of "being colleagues working toward the same goals."

One might speculate that the loyalty that characterizes teachers' feelings about the schools is held in place by a strong, formalized organizational structure, but teachers do not value such a structure. As teachers reflect not on their mission to students but on their relationships with administration, a lack of empathy for the position of administrators was often evident. Excellence in administration is perceived and appreciated when "principals see and use the gifts and talents of teachers," when "administrators listen to teachers though they may not do what you want," and when principals are clear about the foundation of the beliefs underlying the schools: community and care.

One hypothesis emerging from our analysis is that administrators in these schools may recognize that their teachers are paid poorly and should not be burdened with administrative details. Therefore, administrators support an organizational culture where problem students are not expelled, community is stressed, and as long as teachers do their jobs they are left alone. Schools that evidenced the strongest sense of Marianist culture were those where administrators could make more demands on teachers. These were the schools that probably could attract new teachers more easily than schools where the culture was less Marianist and thus could not as easily attract teachers to replace those who might become dissatisfied and leave.

Family spirit, service, and quality education are the next three dimensions of meaning that emerged from conversations with teachers. Two of these themes relate to two of the five Marianist themes: family spirit and quality integrated education. The theme of service seems to be embedded across other themes.

Domain 2: A sense of family involves appreciation of diversity, care, and loyalty, and is manifested in events.

Within the meaning of family spirit, teachers overall seemed to construct a life around issues of diversity, caring, loyalty, and concrete experiences of spirit such as sports activities. Diversity, the first issue, is a double-edged sword related to family spirit. That the members of the school community come from a variety of racial, ethnic, gender, religious, academic ability, and socioeconomic backgrounds strengthens students' ability and skills in getting along with others. A positive attitude toward tolerance is present. Nondiscrimination is valued. On the other hand, the more diverse the members of the school community, the more difficult it might be to generate unity in school spirit.

Family spirit, secondly, is grounded in care. This sense of family is even deeper than usual definitions of family because it includes dimensions of friendship and trust built on other than biological grounds. According to teachers, Fr. Chaminade's principle to "treat people better than they deserve" characterizes the caring environment of these schools. Support, warmth, comfort, the value of students' emotional needs, and the appropriateness of responding to them were fundamental to how these teachers talked about family spirit.

An integral component of family spirit is loyalty. Once again this quality emerges, but in a new context. Loyalty comes through in the cohesiveness and longevity of the faculty. Teachers value being part of both the school and something larger than the school. Loyalty is directed not only to the community within the school but the Society of Mary and the broader Christian community. In some schools, teachers want living proof of their identity as Marianists; these desires are expressed, perhaps as false hopes, in their cries of "Send us brothers!"

Loyalty is reinforced for teachers when they receive positive feedback for their work. Loyalty fosters a commitment that this school is a good place to teach, a good place in which to invest time, energy, and hopes for the future. Loyalty lives in concrete ways in those who graduate from the school and then return to teach there.

Finally, family spirit is evident in sports events, where spirit shows in tangible and visible ways. Athletics are related to school spirit, to school identity. When employment or responsibilities at home take away from the time students have to devote to sports and other extracurricular activities, family spirit can be diminished. Pep rallies and the involvement of alumni, teachers, and entire families reinforce family spirit.

An attempt to build and maintain a culture of community is overtly fostered by the frequency with which teachers and administrators use the words community, family, and caring to describe the culture of their schools.

PARENTS

Conversations with parents in the focus groups generated three strong domains of meaning: academic excellence, a religion and faith dimension, and the desire for the service requirement in the curriculum to be linked to the wider world. Several other less prevalent domains emerged, but these three themes dominated. Among the other themes were the education of the whole person as a dimension of Marianist schools, the centrality of sports, and the lifelong connection to these schools, including a sense of belonging.

Domain 1: Academic excellence is the first priority for parents.
Academic challenge was constructed as a strand in parents' thinking from a variety of perspectives. To the parents, the academic rigor of these schools was a strong motivating force for enrolling their child. Continually reinforcing their choice are the quality of education provided and the care teachers display toward students, e.g., "spending time outside class with students," "walking the talk," and "being willing to go the extra mile" to insure that students succeed. Teachers were the topic of discussion in many of the narratives, while some focused on the theme of academic excellence. However, parents' perceptions of teachers were that the teachers are caring people and committed, personal advocates for their children. Most parents viewed academic excellence as a path to college preparation and future success. A minority of parents warned about the pressures from too much rigor or too high expectations. This wariness seemed tied to the strong concern for educating the whole child. As one parent stated, "It is difficult for the average ability student to chase their other talents because of the academic demands of the school." While academic excellence is valued by parents, it is valued in the context of a Catholic education.

Domain 2: Teaching their children the Catholic faith has value both now and for their children's lifetime.
The religious theme meant several things to these parents. The importance of a religious foundation for building character in their children was strong. There existed the feeling that religion classes are less explicitly Catholic and merely Christian. The fact that their children study religion in an academic way is not a guarantee that they will lead their lives in a Christian or Catholic way. Parents like the fact that the school reinforces the values that they attempt to teach at home. Despite the seemingly limited life application that religion seems to have in a milieu focused on academic rigor, parents feel that the exposure to religion in a formal way is beneficial to students in learning about and maintaining a faith life in the future.

A quantitative study using surveys of constituents of Marianist-affiliated schools was conducted in 1995-96, from which a technical report was presented to the Marianist Education Consortium, September 1996. In a 1995-

96 survey, parents were asked their motivation for selecting a Catholic high school. Responses most often reflected religious reasons as the major reasons for their choice. In the focus groups, however, parents did not specifically identify religion, faith, or Catholicism as the only motivation for selecting the school; their reasons combined academics and faith, countering the purely religious reasons given on the written survey for selecting the school. This discrepancy points out that written and oral responses often differ because of the format in which the question is asked. One interpretation of this conflict is that in casual conversation more natural and valid comments are made. The emerging justification for choosing these schools in the focus group setting was overwhelmingly the fact that the child chose the school, and the second strongest reason was high academic expectations. Third was the fact that family members had attended this school or one like it, and fourth was the fact that the school had fewer social problems than did the available public schools. On direct questions in a survey, the respondent is more attentive to the inquiry and more likely to give the socially desirable response. Another possibility is that when asked on an anonymous survey why they chose their children's high schools, parents feel more compelled to confirm the religious reasons than they do in a conversation in a Catholic school with other parents where the topic was the meaning of a Marianist school. In this setting, the religious reasons are more likely to be presumed. In other words, parental statements may have been influenced by the belief that there's no need, in this conversation, to state the obvious.

Many parents mentioned the word "sacrifice" in their discussions. The sacrifice seemed to be driven by two factors. First, the desire to provide their children with the best education available was a force in their thinking. Second, the belief that the Marianist schools support their values related to faith in daily life was also prominent. Sacrifice plays a major role in creating the organization's culture, i.e., parental involvement, loyalty (when sacrifice is rewarded), criticism (when sacrifice fails to yield the hoped-for results).

Domain 3: Service connects students' lives to the world outside themselves. In some schools parents discussed the service requirement in the context of faith formation. Service, to them, was a way to connect their children's lives to the meaning of their faith. To many parents, service was tied to socialization beyond the school. Service enhances students' understanding of the world outside the school; it connects them to a potential life after high school and is a component of educating the whole person. Service moves beyond the cognitive into the affective and social. A strong strand in the meaning of service for parents was the notion that it should be strengthened as a requirement, that students must reflect on the meaning of service, and that service should take them beyond their immediate environment.

Domain 4: That the schools educate the whole person appeals to parents. Marianist schools work in ways that value the whole person, a moderately strong theme for these parents. Their children learn early that life is more than the classroom. Their talents, skills, and interests beyond academic achievement are valued.

Parents engaged in little discussion about the cost of sending their children to these schools, although the discussion of sacrifice emerged from time to time as described earlier. There was some, but little, discussion of parent involvement in school activities. More of this discussion related to their desire to see their children involved. Communication with the school was addressed, but also in a minor way.

ALUMNI

The meaning of school experiences that we were able to derive from alumni was less valuable than that gleaned from the other groups. We felt this way for several reasons. Alumni were prone to make as many judgments about life in the schools today as they were to make judgments about life in schools when they were students. Alumni, being for the most part a convenience sample, included individuals who currently were involved in school life in some way, whether as parents, teachers, or boosters of extracurricular school life. Alumni also included graduates who had attended the schools over a wide period of time. We did not hear from alumni who came from distances and who might have had more objective reflections on their own experiences, a more external interpretation of the meaning of those experiences. Despite these limitations we gleaned from transcripts several domains of meaning that are discussed in the following sections. Throughout these analyses we were reminded that post-Vatican II students have a different focus than do those who were students in earlier eras.

Domain 1: Experiences in the schools took faith beyond religion. Alumni characterize their schools as a faith-filled culture. The "whole school was about Catholic faith." Catholic Church teachings were included, but the life of the school went beyond that. Values of the parish families were reinforced. Some expressed frustration with changes in religion and the Church that moved schools away from a strong religious center.

Domain 2: Alumni look back on school as an "ideal family." While school spirit is often difficult to generate, it is a deep and positive memory for most alumni. Friends, Marianist priests and brothers, and teachers were a "tight knit" group. There was a sense of belonging, fraternity, a "feeling of being a part of something," according to the alumni.

Domain 3: Schools currently serve God and others with more intention than they did in the past.
Alumni applaud the requirement of student service. They recall that service was not always formally structured as it is now. Alumni recognize service requirements as a trend, "a 90s thing—even public schools do it." Alumni believe this is positive; with service more intentional, the social mission of the Gospel is, perhaps, more effectively emphasized.

In light of the fact that service seemed disconnected from a deep spiritual or social justice purpose for current students, we remain unconvinced that structuring it in a formal way improves the meaning of service. Formalizing it may do just the opposite. Service may become just another assignment to get done, another task to do.

Domain 4: Alumni's school experience focused on developing the whole person.
Despite the overwhelmingly academic emphasis in the schools, alumni value the appreciation of the whole person that they experienced. They feel "well-rounded," educated in "mind, body, and spirit." They talked about the people being more important than the content. Social skills, manners, how to succeed—all were part of the whole person context, as they remembered it. Not all remarks were positive: Some bemoaned weaknesses in science and technology.

Domain 5: Tradition in school life is a foundation for change; our identity as tied to tradition and change is a part of preserving traditions.
Tradition is part of alumni language. They expressed pride and involvement—particularly with emphasis on athletics and academics. They valued being able to "get an edge up on life," having been to a school that is "a cut above." They referred to the tradition of discipline, the value of reputation, and their fears for traditions slipping away. They felt well-developed and ready for college life. Nostalgia was expressed by some as a desire to regain some traditions, for example in athletics and in Marianist spirituality. To recapture and strengthen these, they acknowledge, requires change. As society changes, school must adapt.

Successful alumni did much to inform the schools' organizational culture. Professional athletes, wealthy business people, and influential politicians were cited as proof that this was a good school and encouraged the students' and parents' dream that they too could become successful.

COMMON AND CONNECTED DOMAINS OF MEANING ACROSS THE FOUR GROUPS

Our conclusions here may not be the conclusions that educators within each

school would reach. They may not be conclusions on which all members of our research team would agree. The domains of meaning that we present are the product of reviewing transcripts of taped focus groups, extracting meaning from them, and then combining those meaning units into categories. The three of us are the interpreters of the data. We have been closely involved with the data, processing them individually and constructing our own meaning from what we each read. Then through conversations and the reading of early drafts of this text, we agreed on these findings. As interpreters, we remain neither separate from the interpretation nor objective about it. Much of our selves is embedded in this report.

Needless to say, we were restricted to interpreting what we read in the transcripts. Much may be going on in these schools (both as experience and as meaning) that was not told to us. All we were able to consider was what we were told.

The meaning of a Marianist education connected the four groups. We attempted to draw a holistic picture of life in these Marianist schools, taking into account the themes that emerged from within the groups.

The faith life of the Marianist schools is carried out in public ways that attempt to marry religion to the world outside the school. One dimension of this link to the world outside is the vigorous efforts to make faith life a lifelong dynamic. Shaping one's future life to embrace a faith dimension is clear. Rather than a spirituality characterized as personal and internal, faith and belief seemed manifest in external ways. Faith was formalized. Little language of personal spirituality was heard. This may be expected in a public conversation like that of the focus groups. Conflicts with modern culture confront the school's faith life daily, although the dynamics of the competing values were not described. There may be a retreat from the faith-culture dialogue within the schools, rather than a welcome and thoughtful engagement in the struggle.

The centrality of Catholic and Marianist beliefs to the life of the school is, no doubt, tacitly understood. It is implicit, perhaps seeming unremarkable to those with whom we talked. We sensed, however, that when school leaders (teachers, parents, and administrators) assume that faith formation is happening students may not see it. Students need the implicit made explicit in order to link core Catholic beliefs to the activities of school life. Service requirements might be one application where these connections can be made more visible to students.

The meaning of school life varied for students from being very personal to being very formal or structured. Dichotomizing the personal and the formal was helpful in deriving an implication from these findings. The fact that students feel a very personal connection to school as a caring place (see Domain 2) could be exploited, perhaps, to help a faith life (now a formal one) to have a deeper, more personal meaning.

The importance of service within school life is recognized; service programs are active and fruitful. To serve is to act; and to act is to affect the world in some way. Service is tightly connected to the curriculum and is integrated into instruction. In fact, service supports the notion of students being holistic persons with integrated minds, bodies, hearts, and spirits. To the extent that service requirements become increasingly and rigidly structured, there is a danger of service becoming just another assignment. Indeed, there was language describing concrete service activities but less language that spoke to using service to reverse social injustice, to attend to the powerless, or to promote the dignity of all people.

The experience of school life strongly addresses the whole person. The academic, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of life are alive and well. The heavy academic emphasis, however, tips the balance away from such qualities as critical thought, creativity, self-knowledge, and reflectivity. Ethnic diversity within the school enriches school life; clearly many value living and learning in a diverse community. But little meaning emerged that showed curricular focus on cultural pluralism.

A serious sense of community and family imbues these schools. Past and present students relish the "ideal" family and the care and time teachers give to them. School life means deep feelings of loyalty, a meaning we frequently encountered. One senses a cultural distinctiveness in these feelings, rather than a distinctiveness bounded merely by religion or education.

SUMMARY

The EMMET research project captured data that lend support to the idea that Catholic Marianist schools manifest an identifiable ethos in harmony with the stated mission of the schools. The five characteristics of Marianist education were evident in all 13 schools studied. Specifically, we can paint a clear picture of community, formal faith, and educating for wholeness as factors in Marianist school culture.

While all four constituencies long for a greater physical Marianist presence with priests and brothers actively teaching and administering in the schools, the current lay faculties and leadership are clearly perpetuating the Marianist charism on a day-to-day basis.

This unique school culture is most evident in the sense of belonging and loyalty enjoyed by both students and teachers, a lived devotion to the centrality of Catholic Marianist values, and a deep respect for the worth of all persons. This is perhaps the essence of the experience and meaning of a Marianist education today.

REFERENCES

Brotherson, M. (1994). Interactive focus group interviewing: A qualitative research method in early intervention. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 14,* 101-119.

Bryk, A. S., Lee, V. E., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic schools and the common good.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Coleman, J. S., Hoffer, T., & Kilgore, S. (1982). *High school achievement: Public, Catholic, and private schools compared.* New York: Basic Books.

Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., & Gall, J. P. (1996). *Educational research.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Gamoran, A. (1996). Student achievement in public magnet, public comprehensive, and private city high schools. *Educational Evaluation & Policy Analysis, 18*(1), 1-18.

Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. D. (1984). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research.* San Diego, CA: Academic Press, Inc.

Greeley, A. (1982). *Catholic high schools and minority students.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Groome, T. H. (1996). What makes a school Catholic? In T. McLaughlin, J. O'Keefe, & B. O'Keeffe (Eds.), *The contemporary Catholic school: Context, identity and diversity* (pp. 107-125). London: The Falmer Press.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1982). Epistemological and methodological bases of naturalistic inquiry. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal, 31,* 233-252.

Hesburgh, T. (1986, October). Catholic education in America. *America,* pp. 160-163.

Lancy, D. F. (1993). *Qualitative research in education.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. S. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Morgan, D. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

National Catholic Educational Association. (1996-1997). *United States Catholic elementary and secondary schools, 1996-1997: Annual statistical report on schools, enrollment, and staffing.* Washington, DC: Author.

Newman, I., & Benz, C. R. (1998). *Qualitative-quantitative research methodology: Exploring the interactive continuum.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

O'Brien, D. J. (1994). *From the heart of the American church: Catholic higher education and American culture.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Rossman, G. B., Corbett, H. D., & Firestone, W. A. (1988). *Change and effectiveness in schools: A cultural perspective.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview.* New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Tedesco, J. (1977) *Quotations from Marianist and Catholic Church sources.* Dayton, OH: North American Center for Marianist Studies.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Wilson, E. K. (1971). *Sociology: Rules, roles, and relationships.* Homewood, IL: Dorsey.

Carolyn S. Ridenour, Ed.D., is professor in the Department of Educational Administration; Alan Demmitt, Ph.D., is assistant professor in the Department of Counselor Education and Human Services; and Jill L. Lindsey-North, Ph.D., recently completed research on spirituality and creativity. All are in the School of Education and Allied Professions at the University of Dayton. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Carolyn Ridenour, Department of Educational Administration, University of Dayton, 300 College Park, Dayton, Ohio 45469-0534.